

Reflection (Sharon with help from Kris and Stacy) - *The Unity Club – Inspiration for the Future*

At our Program Meeting in September, we started talking about this service, and someone suggested we should start by reading through our “detailed church history.” I believe the church history was mostly written by Gordon Muise, who was our church historian for many years.

I read through the four and a half page detailed history document and one paragraph caught my attention. Here it is...

“When in 1895 a new organ was added, paid for by subscriptions, the newspaper reported the Unitarian Church was the most progressive in town. One of the spark plugs for church life was the Unity Club, which flourished for years. Hosting speakers on topics ranging from the advantages of socialism (with the speaker claiming the Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts, and the Morgans were doing more for socialism than the socialists), the topics ran the gamut to travelogues. The newspaper carried regular and detailed reports of church life, often of the Unity Club, of church anniversaries, memorial services, and guest speakers.”

Two things jumped off the page when I read this paragraph. The first was the characterization of our church as “the most progressive in town” with credit given to the Unity Club for that distinction. The second thing of interest was that the newspaper was covering Unity Club events. This meant I could find out more about this “spark plug for church life.”

It turns out that newspaper articles from *The Westborough Chronotype*, the town newspaper at that time, can be accessed online through the Westborough Public Library. I’m not sure when the Unity Club officially started or ended, but I do know that the *Chronotype* had regular coverage of Unity Club activities from 1880 to 1908. I want to give a shoutout of appreciation to whoever was responsible for making sure the newspaper had regular updates on Unity Club and other church activities back in the day - they deserve an A+ for their efforts! There was a lot of coverage, and it has been quite engrossing and fun to learn about this vibrant church group.

Unity Clubs were often formed by Unitarian churches back in the 1800's. I wasn't able to find an overarching mission statement for these clubs, but it makes sense, given what the club was doing, that it had something to do with "Unitarianism" and "Community."

The Unity Club at the First Congregational Unitarian Society of Westborough, which is what this church was called back then, was first and foremost a social club. It was clear that their unspoken mission was to bring together members of the community. They did that by hosting speakers, concerts, suppers, plays, poetry readings, musicals, and more. Aside from special events, nearly every regular meeting of the Unity Club included music. These monthly meetings were open to the public and non-members were asked to pay \$0.15 cents.

Before I go on about the Unity Club, I want to say a word about the organ, since the paragraph in our church history mentions the organ. I learned a couple things about the organ as I was digging through articles from 1895. First, I found out how much it cost to build the organ. It was built in 1895 - 128 years ago. Does anyone want to hazard a guess as to how much it cost?

It cost \$1200 to have the organ built and another \$100 to have it "fitted" to the church. As a frame of reference, I'll share that several years ago we received an estimate for how much it would cost to refurbish the organ – the estimate came in at over \$100,000! Shocking!

I'll ask Lisa to share a slide with the announcement in the Chronotype about the Organ Dedication concert in 1895. It's hard to read, but you might be able to make out that none other than the builder himself, Professor George H. Ryder played the organ at that concert!

In the fine print it says that the church quartet performed at the concert. The minister at that time was Rev. J. H. Weeks. In addition to being a minister, he was a singer, a baritone in fact, and he was often listed as a soloist at various Unity Club events. He sang with the quartet in this first organ concert.

Another famous person who was in the quartet at the organ concert was Miss Annie E. Fales. She was an active member of this church and a member of the Unity Club. Annie Fales was such an important person in the town of

Westborough. I'd like to **invite Kris Allen to come up** and read a brief article she wrote about her life.

(Kris)

“Annie Elizabeth Fales was born in Walpole on July 17, 1867, and moved to Westborough at age seven. She was an 1885 graduate of Westborough High School and went on to earn her teaching credentials at Worcester Normal School, which is now Worcester State.

After graduating in 1887, she taught in Upton, then returned to Westborough. Her first hometown assignment was teaching in the one-room District 8 School House near Lake Chauncy. Fales taught fifth through eighth grade. When the Eli Whitney School opened on Grove Street in 1902, she was named principal.

A lifelong love of music motivated her to take voice lessons in Boston and learn to play several instruments. Fales was a soloist in the Unitarian Church choir, as well as the organist. Many special events at the high school were enlivened by Fales’ piano accompaniment.

Fales lived most of her life at 58 West Main Street across from the library. Her home was filled with the aroma of homemade baked beans, which she shared with neighbors. Active in the community, Fales was a member of the Women’s Club, Garden Club, Historical Society, and the Round Table.

She retired in 1937 and lived to be 104. Over the span of her career, Fales molded the lives of more than 1,000 Westborough students.

At age 95, she shared her philosophy of teaching: “Patience, a sense of humor, and a real love of children — that makes a good teacher.” Fales died on March 3, 1972, and her memory is honored in the elementary school that bears her name.”

Topics of discussion at Unity Club meetings were quite diverse and entertaining. We’ll share a smattering of newspaper clippings to give you a feel for what people

were interested in hearing about at that time... and not only that, but you'll also get a feel for how the Unity Club was regarded in the community.

(Stacy)

For the most part, the Unity Club was secular in its activities, but this first clipping from the early days of the Club, shows they were interested in theology especially as it related to Unitarianism.

November 20, 1880

“The Theology of Robert Burns” was the subject of the lecture by Rev. George Bremner of Uxbridge, before the Unity Club, at Odd Fellows Hall, Tuesday evening. The first part of the lecture was in the nature of an essay on theology in general and particularly from the Unitarian standpoint, taking the extreme view of Christ as a man and teacher only, holding that there are doubtless persons now living whose lives are equal in simplicity and goodness to that of the savior of mankind, but such person had not made themselves known to the world.

The portion of the lecture referring especially to the theology and poetical works of Scotland's greatest poet was of a most interesting nature and held the closest attention of the audience during its delivery. The speaker, being a Scotchman, was evidently an enthusiastic admirer of Burns and his works. The lecture was frequently interspersed with the recitation of brief extracts from the works of the great poet.

(Sharon)

The Unity Club was interested in sports...

November 24, 1894

The Unity Club meeting on Tuesday evening in the chapel was well attended to hear the discussion of the question, “Resolved, that football as played by college teams and amateurs is detrimental to health and morals.” The debate was quite lively. M. Neilsen opened in the affirmative and was followed by E. E. Dunlap and J. S. Gates. The negative was opened by William Miller

followed by F. W. Taylor. The vote on the merits of the question was 19 in the affirmative and 5 in the negative. Music duet by Misses Wood and Denfeld.

(Stacy)

The Unity Club cared about science... (Stacy to read)

December 5, 1896

“X-Rays” were demonstrated at the Unitarian church on Wednesday evening by Mr. Chester B. Curtis, of Dartmouth College, in a lecture of special interest to people of a scientific turn of mind, and of greater or less interest to all.

The attention given the speaker showed the desire to receive all the information possible about a subject which is yet in its infancy and seems destined to occupy a very prominent place in the world as time goes on.

Mr. Curtis had a complete electrical apparatus which was propelled by electric power from the Westboro Electric Light Works. The experiments were of great interest and demonstrated the immense power of electricity. Photographs were taken of a person’s hand and various articles handed to Mr. Curtis by people in the audience. The skeleton of the hand was clearly seen by those near the instrument.

After the interesting experiments were shown on canvass with the aid of the stereopticon, many pictures were shown representing electrical effects. Thomas A. Edison, the great inventor, was seen life size on the canvass and also the discoverer of the X-Rays, which closed the entertainment.

In their program for the coming season, the Unity Club, under whose auspices this lecture was given, have arranged for several lectures of interest on different themes. High class lectures are far too few in comparison to so many entertainments of a lighter class, and it is gratifying to see an organization now and then that appreciates that fact.

It's worth mentioning that the church's gas lamps were replaced by electric lights in 1895, so the Unity Club wasted no time showcasing this new technology, though I do feel bad that they didn't know about the dangers of radiation.

(Sharon)

The Unity club cared about issues related to health...

March 6, 1897

The members of the Unity Club, and their friends, gained considerable information in regard to bacteria, last Tuesday evening. Dr. Adams, with his assistants, Drs. Klopp and Cushman furnished the evening's entertainment.

Dr. Adams gave a talk upon the subject in general, followed by Dr. Cushman with a paper on "non-pathogenic Bacteria," or those that are useful and non-producing of disease. Dr. Klopp followed Dr. Cushman with a paper on "Pathogenic Bacteria," or disease producing germs. Lantern slides were made use of to throw upon a screen views of the different kinds of bacteria, which were interestingly explained by Dr. Cushman, who is evidently a thorough student in this field of science.

The use of microscopes, under the direction of Drs. Klopp and Cushman, added much to the interest of the subject, giving those present an opportunity to see, not only the pictures of, but the genuine bacteria.

(Stacy)

This last article serves as an example of the Unity Club's appreciation of good humor.

December 2, 1905

"The Snow Ball" at Grange hall on Wednesday and Thursday evenings was different from any snow ball ever seen in the hall before, or even in town, or of the farce-comedy by that name, given the Unity Club never had a previous

presentation here.

On Thursday evening there was a large audience, and none regretted having braved the sharp November wind to be present, for the rendition of the piece was excellent from beginning to end. That was the decision in substance often heard as the audience left the hall.

There were frequent very humorous situations which brought forth shouts of laughter... The parts were well placed and each of the cast seemed to be at ease and perfectly at home in their rendition.

At intervals the Unity Club orchestra of five pieces rendered excellent music and after the play the orchestra furnished music for dancing until one o'clock, a large number tripping the light fantastic. The Unity Club never fails of making a success in their annual dramatic entertainments.

The town hall scenery, it is hoped, will before another year rolls around be in condition to meet the requirements of the state authorities, so that dramatic entertainments can be resumed there. An asbestos curtain is all that is required to bring that about.

(Sharon)

The thing that struck me most about the Unity Club was how integrated into Westborough society it was. It was clear that many people from town attended Unity Club events and meetings, not just the members of the Unitarian church. I'm guessing, and we can confirm, that it fueled the growth of the church as people who enjoyed Unity club events decided they wanted to be a part of this progressive society.

I'm hoping that taking this look back into the past will help us think about the future. Here's a question for us all to ponder; if there was a Unity Club today, what would they be up to? I'm not suggesting we start up a Unity club, those days have passed, but **if the spirit of those fun-loving club members was with us today, and I think it is, what would it inspire us to offer to the community?**

So now we're going to do a very progressive thing we call "Views from the Pews" where everyone is invited to share their thoughts. We'll pass around the microphone here in the Sanctuary and those on Zoom can write their thoughts in the chat box or raise your hand and I'll call on you to share.

How can we, as members and friends of UUCSW, carry forward the Heritage passed on to us by the Unity Club?

One of the things I miss about the days when Kathie Metzger was chairing the Program Committee was how she often would bring in a speaker to offer a reflection during the service. Nancy Siegal invited Dr. Sarah Shields to speak recently here.

- One thought a few of us have had is to host a speaker's series that is separate from Sunday services. This is very much in the same vein of what the Unity Club was doing.
- A second idea is to bring more music into the church by hosting either a coffee house (that used to be a thing here) or a monthly open mic.